

Book Review: What is Making Class?

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Book Reviews

WHAT IS MAKING CLASS?

Beverley Skeggs

Class, Self, Culture

London: Routledge, 2004, 226 pp., ISBN 0-415-30086

Class cannot be made alone. (Skeggs, 2004: 3)

Class, Self, Culture was published in 2004, but is less known than most of Beverley Skeggs's work. One reason for this is perhaps that the whole project she is developing is intimidating. Skeggs tries to build a complete analysis of how class is constructed through the history of classifications, academic perspectives, political rhetoric and popular representation. Much of this is a continuation of Skeggs's book *Formations of Class and Gender* from 1997. That book was built on ethnography among young northern UK working-class girls, and theoretically *Class, Self, Culture* continues where *Formations* left off. More than writing about something completely new, for example based on new empirical research, Skeggs brings together debates from different areas and contributions from different authors. The book contributes to answering several questions, which in themselves are academic fields: the existence of class in contemporary societies, the relationship between the economic and the cultural, the relationship between class and other classifications, such as gender and race, idealism in feminist epistemologies and many more. The text is so dense I am sure Skeggs could have written books on each and every one of these, but instead she aims at bringing it all together in 226 pages.

Skeggs rightfully claims that: 'As a concept, class is, therefore, being used to do many things: provide academic legitimacy, frame an academic discipline, speak to "the people", measure social change, stand in for the social itself' (p. 41). That is a lot of needs and concerns put into one concept, and needless to say, the term cannot always perform well – especially since it is the most defined subject in sociology at the same time as being poorly defined. Class is everything and nothing. It is therefore an important and brave task Skeggs takes on when she refuses to take the easy way out by concentrating only on a small part of the whole.

As a difficult endeavour, it is of course not easily pulled off or accessed. It is a highly technical book at times, and it is not an appropriate introductory book, but rather a text for scholars already interested in the making of class. I hope this does not discourage those in most need of the book: scholars who don't recognize the value of the concept of class in contemporary society and scholars who make use of it in a commonsensical way, making it do everything. Of course, these are not easy issues, and I don't mind that in itself, but I do believe the argument could be

more accessible. However, the debate on class in the UK is generally more theoretical than in any other country I know. This is perhaps due to the obsession with class in the UK, as well as the normalization of class differences. In other countries, including my own, theoretical discussions on the concept of class are more of an acquired taste. Not to scare the potential reader, but I actually sat down and tried to read it several times before I managed to keep track of the various terms, processes and levels. In the first chapter, many terms and relationships are introduced, and many of them come with big debates attached, such as exploitation, exchange, value, capital and self. Chapter 1 made more sense to me when I reread it after finishing the rest of the book.

Even though I like the fact that this is a theoretical book, I find Skeggs to be at her best when she uses empirical examples showing us what she means. This is especially true when she explores the relationship between the concept of class and the concept of self. Here she directly continues her previous work in *Formations*. Skeggs claims that not all have access to selfhood and that this has consequences for which individuals can be included and how exclusion is constructed. Without a self, one is only a part of a mass: whereas middle-class people are individuals, working-class people may only become individuals through appropriating the values of the middle class. There are many practical and political implications of the realization that class is at the heart of how we conceive of a self and of questions of recognition. How subjectivity is understood is an increasingly important marker of difference between individuals and groups as modern societies go from direct to indirect governance. When proper selves are being delegated the responsibility of self-governance, they serve as a contrast to those in need of governance. The professional reformers growing in numbers every year need to deal with the differences between themselves and those in need of reform, and the framing of this difference is one of the most important sites of class struggle today.

The question of whose narratives can be identified as claiming a self, has epistemological consequences. Skeggs poses a serious challenge to feminist standpoint theory:

The debates over identity and epistemological justification, therefore, are about the claim and *right to know*. This is a moral articulation. It is also a naïve formulation of 'position must equal truth must produce authority and legitimation'. . . . These debates assume that there is an identity that can be used as a resource, and that people want to tell their stories in order to produce a moral claim from the telling. (p. 127)

The demand on researchers, both feminists and others, to be 'reflexive' has in many instances come to mean that scholars have to sum up their positions. It is important that we don't believe that this gets rid of power and privilege and the ways in which they influence knowledge.

Skeggs is arguing for the continuing importance of the concept of class and she shows us what writing it off is all about and how using other terms often places responsibility for the consequences of class on the individual. Skeggs insists that we should be aware of ways in which we risk losing sight of class. With the working class increasingly becoming multiethnic, it is important that that doesn't lead us to believe that the importance of class is being replaced with ethnicity or race. That the composition of the working class changes doesn't mean that class isn't still the proper framing. Skeggs insists that the making of class has to be linked to other classifications, and her book is therefore a valuable addition to mainstream feminist scholarship. More and more we realize that no concept alone

can do the job for us. We need to understand the relationship between classificatory schemes and between concepts, positions and experiences. These days, most agree that we need to be sensitive to issues of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. in doing empirical work. But that is easier said than done. There is no way that one scholar can have knowledge of the making of class in the detail that Skeggs has at the same time as paying full attention to gender, race, sexuality, geography, etc. This book provides an example of what we stand to lose if we demand a democratic representation of everything everywhere. But still, *Class, Self, Culture* is about the intersections between class, gender and race, because it shows how understandings and representations of class are gendered and racialized.

As Skeggs points out, there are some scholars who would place class in the realm of the economic, while placing other classifications, such as gender and sexuality, in the cultural. Skeggs's book is a comment on such a division, making visible how class needs to be understood in cultural terms. The book is therefore also on the relationship between the cultural and the economic, or rather on how the cultural is not an area of life operating in a different logic than the economic, that it is also about appropriation, exploitation and resistance. An example in the book is how while the working class is generally constructed as wrong in opposition to the middle class, who are right, there are still parts of working-class culture that can be claimed and used as resources by the middle class. This is called selective appropriation.

I am hardly doing justice to the complexity of the book or the concept of class here, but I hope that I have been able to convey that I find *Class, Self, Culture* to be a good and important book. The question of what class is in its totality is important, and there are too many scholars dealing with small pieces of the puzzle compared to the few people trying to solve it.

REFERENCE

Skeggs, Beverley (1997) *The Formations of Class and Gender*. London: Sage.

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BEHIND THE MASK: BLACK HYBRID IDENTITIES

Shirley Anne Tate
Black Skins, Black Masks: Hybridity, Dialogism, Performativity
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, 181 pp., ISBN 0-7546-3641-0

In *Black Skins, Black Masks*, Shirley Anne Tate explores and challenges discourses of Black authenticity that equate Blackness with dark skin and a Caribbean and/or African heritage. She is concerned with an 'everyday' hybridity that challenges these powerful discourses, arguing that an in-depth study of hybridity provides us with new insights into 'race', racism, politics and culture. She critiques much of the theorization of hybridity dating from the early 1990s, arguing that it has excluded Black women's voices and Black women's experiences. Tate's aim is to move beyond hybridity to examine how Blackness is transformed and reformed in women's talk and through their social actions.